

## ***Moving in a Tangled Web***

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Prairie Group, 2022

### Paper #3: Entanglements

*Driven by forces of capitalism, exceptionalism, binary-thinking, and an ethic of extraction, climate change is also feeding the collapse of these same forces. How can we think beyond human exceptionalism and narratives of vertical evolution and “progress?” Key themes: symbiosis/the symbiocene/chthulucene; queer theory/queering nature; ecowomanism/gender and interconnectedness*

### ***From When We Come***

I can remember the afternoon, freshly submerged, as if baptized in the righteous zeal as a converted environmental activist, when we made the adults in our lives, who were certainly ignorant, we hoped, or at worst earth villains, watch the groundbreaking documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. It was just as uncomfortable as you might imagine, in our blue collar, moderately conservative, southern Minnesota family home. After the sheer force of facts and graphs and cinematography only Al Gore could provide, we were sure our work was done. Surely our families would now embrace the radical action needed to save this planet from immediate annihilation by our own will. Not so much.

“*Interesting*”, was the response, as is a common response among many people I grew up with (and still serve) with high percentages of northern Scandinavian lineage who avoid confrontation and direct language. So, we knew the response actually meant: *I didn't like that and am annoyed that this situation happened at all.*

Beyond the sociological analysis of the day, I recall one part of the film where there was a scale, and a sarcastic Al Gore, speaking about the economics of climate change where one side of the scale was gold bars, and the other side was the entire planet earth. While I agreed, and believe there was both an inconvenient and uncomfortable truth that resided in those images and words, it still strikes me as a type of either/or dichotomizing and the imperative to choose a side.

It is good to remember our entanglements in this world, and in this work, of living in right relationship with each other, and all living beings, begins from well before we were born. I know, even as I differ from many in my family in environmental ethics, and agree that greed and wealth and capitalism are evil and ripping apart the planet, and communities, and souls, it's good to remember that even with these unconvinced souls we still share some common values.

Over time, I realized more and more that my family did practice many earth friendly ways of living. While it wasn't usually from a place of dismay of the Anthropocene, it was a way to live in right relationship with the earth. It came from a place of common-sense and fragile conservation of resources. For instance, I still use the cooler my parents were gifted in 1975, and it looks like its fresh off the shelf. They cared for their belongings because they often could not afford new ones. It is those some values that that kept the house frigid in the winter, quite warm in the summer with shades shut to keep out the sun, never wasting one scrap of food and re-using anything that could be reused.

One of my earliest memories as a toddler was picking up aluminum cans around the local parks with my mom. At the time, I thought we were helping "pick up litter" which is true. I knew more, growing up, that it may have been partly that, but just as much that we need every coin we could get by turning them in, because our family left a house we couldn't sell to move so my father could get a job he didn't really want because a back injury made it impossible for him to continue the work he was doing.

So we picked up cans. We cared for the earth. Care for the earth, and practices of conservation, were entangled, in complicated ways, with the need for income, food, and stability, within the larger contexts of systems of capitalism and empire. Entanglements start early, and everywhere. This is one tiny strand of my connections in the web of earth and economics, limited as it is. And, it is only in relationship to each of those strands, that we begin to understand the larger web that we weave, together.

## *A Cloud of Dusty Witnesses*

*For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals, for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup> All go to one place, all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. <sup>21</sup> Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?*

- *Ecclesiastes 3:19-21*

It is muddy work, understanding the myriad of ways we are connected. That mud, as many traditions lift up, is foundational, and sacred, to who we are in the world. Our *unremembering*, structurally through the industrial revolution and beyond, has disconnected and fractured these deeply spiritual, and biological, realities of interconnection.

As Whitney Bauman succinctly points out:

*“Over the course of a few centuries, nature is turned from something that is in many ways alive, to dead stuff that is to be used toward human ends. The question became, what can we get out of the world or what can the rest of nature do for “us” (however defined), rather than what our place is in the world in relationship to other entities.”<sup>1</sup>*

I have found, beyond the early zeal of my growing awareness of climate catastrophe, and the myriad of ways it impacts all of us and especially those on the

<sup>1</sup> Whitney Bauman, ed. “Queer Values for a Queer Climate,” *Meaningful Flesh: Reflections on Religion and Nature for a Queer Planet*, 108.

margins of identity, economics, and access, is an invitation to understand both the beauty, and the brokenness, in this interconnected web.

There are, we know, not only a *thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground*, but a thousand stories and traditions and perspectives that can help guide our ways of inter-being in such a time as this.

In my own spiritual lineage and the taproot of Unitarianism and Universalism, is an early invitation to be in relationship with the earth. Theologian

and scholar Catherine Keller offers a possible re-write, among many versions, of one of the creation stories of Genesis. She writes,

*When Elohim (plural, for God)  
began creating the heaven and earth,  
the earth was an uninhabitable waste, yet wild;  
and darkness was upon the face of the  
deep waters of unfathomed potential, an unformed infinity;  
and the breath and spirit and wind of the gods  
was pulsing over the face of the waters  
then the Gods said, let there be light.<sup>2</sup>*

In this invitational passage, and in this expansive understanding and translation of the text, the spiritual beginning of all things is one of multiplicity. Many Gods/Goddesses/Divinities, an *unformed infinity of possibility*. Beyond this tradition, stretching before and after it, of course, are many more stories, inviting us to repair our relationships with wisdom of ancestors. Bauman writes,

*“...rather than just being in the period of the sixth great extinction, we are beginning to un-derstand more deeply our interrelatedness and co-constructedness with the rest of the natural world; and rather than merely responding with scenarios for how to manage climate change, we have an opportunity to do some*

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2008, pp 48-9  
*deep interspecies listening and unknowing and focus on the indeterminacy of the plan-etary future.*”<sup>3</sup>

Deep interspecies listening, and unknowing, is a beautiful and challenging invitation. Perhaps it could move us toward an invitation to the many stories that ground our past. What if the ancestors have already provided us with more than we need to imagine our way through this beautifully tangled and complex web? As Melanie Harries writes, and asks students,

*“When did I first discover nature? What is my relationship to/with the earth? Who are my conversation partners? Those in the wider field of environmental ethics, religion, gender, peacebuilding, and ecology; activists working across the planet*

*to raise awareness about climate change; brown and black communities waking up to the realities of the impacts of climate change on their bodies; and antiracist activists and scholars wrestling with racial reconciliation. All or many of these partners ...insist that repair and repentance are still priorities in the work of justice.” Ecowomanism, 143.*

I’m wondering these days, beyond the regular connections and information echo chambers I’m tempted to stay in, how am I widening my conversation circles? Not in a way that neutralizes any ethical integrity or lessens the significances of the crises we are living in, somehow pretending all perspectives are valid or worth the energy, but in a way that pays deeper attention to the interconnections of science, spirit, human and non-human wisdom that spans generations? How am I taking the lessons of our biological and spiritual lineage of *multiplicity* and *elasticity*, the fluidity of self and soul that reminds us to move beyond dualisms and dichotomies?

As Harries reminds us, *“In dualisms, such as heaven vs. earth, spirit vs. body, male vs. female, we see that instead of interconnections between the realms,*

<sup>3</sup> *Meaningful Flesh*, 110.

*a separation takes place that places one realm (heaven) over the other.”*<sup>4</sup> How am I moving beyond my own dualisms and either/or thinking toward deeper inter being, interconnection, so that spirit, body, heaven, and earth are honored as intertwined and part of our fuller identity?

In keeping with ritualizing and regularly recalling the invitation of creation stories and our very existence being rooted in multiplicity, perhaps a litany like this, might be one place to begin imagining:

*Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away –  
long ago, in a beginning, when it all began  
there was a turtle that swam to the bottom of the deepest waters  
and on its back, gathered the dust of the swirling ocean depths  
to build the world on its back...  
long ago, in a beginning, when it all began,*

*there was a grandmother spider, who created a web,  
and wove together the deepest waters with the sky and the land,  
and with her saliva and tears mixed with the dust of earth,  
created all living things, weaving life together,  
that kept growing from the beauty that lived within her singing  
long ago, in a beginning, when it all began,  
there was a lotus flower at the center of all things  
and each petal opened, and blossomed,  
and became the ocean depths, and became the tallest mountains,  
and became soil and then plants and grew toward the sky into trees,  
into all living creatures...  
long ago, in a beginning, when it all began,  
energy and power and light  
burst forth in the deepest darkness  
spiraling and dancing through the skies of the heavens,  
moving through generations of stars,  
and generations of planets  
and generations of life  
and generations of plants and animals and people and stories and songs*

<sup>4</sup>Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth Honoring Faiths*, Orbis Books, 2017, 146.

*and tears and hopes and dreams and prayers  
until that very same dust of the very first stars  
became the bones that hold you together –  
you, yourself, made of earth and stars –  
long ago, in a beginning, when it all began,  
there was love – that now lives in this breath; right here, with you.*

Glenn Albrecht writes,

*“Our origins as a species lie in the universe, which is at once both orderly and chaotic. The more we understand the nature of our universe and cosmos, the more we see that life on planet earth is the outcome of might forces that both build and destroy over billions of years. The universe is a place of restless and endless motion. The word emotion has its origins in the Latin movere, “to move,” and emovere, “to agitate, disturb...Emotions are defined as “that which moves us.”<sup>5</sup>*

It is in the dusty mess of our beginnings that we might look to, again, in a time when all we love seems to be in peril. To live within the both/and of an orderly and chaotic universe, what is agitating us enough to move?

***Decomposing Definitiveness***

Part of that attunement is imagining a different world, beyond the rigidity of definitions that have been offered to us as products of the industrial revolution, capitalism, kyriarchy, white supremacy, militarism, and all the ways our humanity and the dignity of the natural world are put under threat. The natural world itself offers us frameworks of possibility to imagine new ways of being.

For instance, I was amazed, though I probably had been told before, that we are less of ourselves than we are ourselves. What I mean is,

*“Microbes are so abundant in the human body that the number of non-human cells is at least equal to that of the number of human cells...Bacteria are not only*

<sup>5</sup> Glenn Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*, Cornell University Press, 2019, 1.

*changing the way our guts behave...we are finding out that gut bacteria have significant impacts on our brains, affecting the ways we think and feel.”*<sup>6</sup>

Our very bodies are less human cells than non-human cells. As much as I try to imagine that, and as much as I question what that means and the complicated histories of defining who is human and who is not – still, it fascinates me. And still, it invites me to consider the ways we are, all of us, made up of things that are more than “us.”

*“Beings – human and not – become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in earthly worlding and unworlding. All of us must become more ontologically inventive and sensible within the bumptious holobiome that earth turns out to be, whether called Gaia or a Thousand Other Names.”*<sup>7</sup>

We are made of a thousand other names – literally. The very scientific, biological realities of life and death, composition and decomposition, provide a way to un-tangle the rigid definitions that have stifled the creative forces of love and life.

As Bauman writes, “In such a universe (or rather multiverse?) the future of this planet is not bound to our preconceived notions of it or any other future conceptions of it; rather, it truly is an open, evolving, planetary community.”<sup>8</sup>

It is our ever-evolving beginnings that offers us something here. Beyond the rigidity and fixedness of the world, people and communities, let alone the earth itself, have been re-defining and expanding our understandings of who we are and how we are connected for millenia. As Bauman writes,

<sup>6</sup> Anna Tsing et al (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, M64.

<sup>7</sup> *Damaged Planet*, M45.

<sup>8</sup> *Meaningful Flesh*, 111.

*“The Modern categories by which we fix our realities, simply no longer hold. The Modern ethics and technologies of control have given way to uncertainty and ambiguity about our planetary future. Once seemingly hermetically sealed categories and boundaries between self/other, human/animal, nature/culture, organic/machine and science/religion, have now been uncovered as leaky and porous.”*<sup>9</sup>

As the child with a lineage filled with plumbers, leaky and porous are not words I tend to resonate with. And yet, *the spirit bloweth where it will*. Not far from where I live and serve, among the bluffs of the southeast corner of the Minnesota, is a beautiful area of rocky edges and valleys known as the *driftless area*. The Minnesota DNR explains that *the area covers 10,000 square miles in adjoining parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois, which were untouched by the most recent glacial advances. As the glaciers receded, torrents of meltwater poured into streams and rivers, carving deep rugged valleys. These rocky walls are made up of a layer of sandstone which were deposited by inland seas between 450 and 500 million years ago.*

And in this area, there is a spring, where the water weaves its way through passageways in the rock, and that spring keeps the water temperate all year – providing a flourishing habitat for trout, watercress, and flowers. The place blooms, lives, thrives, because of the way frozen water, then torrents of meltwater,

made the landscape. This place of abundant life and flourishing the little white flowers you can find there in the spring is because of the way water moved hundreds of millions of years ago.

Even if we think we're anchored, set in stone, solid as rock – in our control, in our ways of belief or thinking or practices –there is always, has always been, an invitation to notice the ways life bubbles up because of what came from something in the past – the way life finds its way, fracturing our certainty or rigidity,

<sup>9</sup> *Meaningful Flesh*, 103.

springing up to create water – something fluid, moving, alive, making a way out of no way, right out of the side of millennia-old walls of rock.

Denise Levertov wrote it this way,

*Don't say, don't say there is no water to solace the dryness at our hearts. I have seen the fountain springing out of the rock wall and you drinking there. Don't say, don't say there is no water. That fountain is there among its scalloped green and gray stones, it is still there and always there with its quiet song and strange power to spring in us, up and out through the rock.*<sup>10</sup>

I love that place, and the sky-clear waters under the shade of trees. It cooled and soothed a bee sting on my child's leg not long ago, as the place seemed to hold us in its ancient beauty, cooling tempers and emotions as well.

It is a way to understand, and celebrate, how our very existence is a way to re-define, re-connect with moving and breathing and shifting forces of life and creation. Queer theory, theology and ecology has done this for a long time, which provides inspiring and hopeful frames for living in the current crisis.

*Queer time are not beholden to the laws of inheritance in the same ways that nuclear family and linear time are. ...With these queerings of time, perhaps we can begin to really couch our own lives in terms of the journeys of other lives, the*

*planet, and the universe. Queer ecology requires a vocabulary envisioning this liquid life. I propose that life-forms constitute a mesh, a nontotal-izable, open ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between or-ganism and environment.<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> Poem: *The Fountain* by Denise Levertov

<sup>11</sup> *Meaningful Flesh*, 114-115.

In this invitation, we bend and move the rigidity of time and definitions, expanding what might be possible, where we might find inspiration, and how we might attend to a beautiful, broken, and breaking ecosystem. It is in our remembering our relationality that we can find where water, fluidity, and boundaries that are thought to be fixed – in society, in ourselves – might be more malleable than once assumed. It might include how we move together, breathe together, work together, knowing that we are made of each other. To find that taproot of possibility from our ancestors, perhaps the widening of circles can start with the ways we ritualize our life together.

*I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
but I will give myself to it.  
I circle around God, around the primordial tower.  
I've been circling for thousands of years  
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,  
a storm, or a great song?<sup>12</sup>*

***Symbiosis <=>. Solostalgia <=>Spirits***

*(Music)*

*We are moving in wider Circles, We are opening our circle  
We are moving in wider circles, We are opening our circle*

*Oh be compass - I'll be your light house  
Speak your words with triumph, And I will watch your mouth*

*I'll march with you my sister, to your place of fearing*

*We'll dive into those waters, swim into the clearing*

*We'll always keep our heads up, we'll always sing along  
We'll walk the path of kindness, know where we belong*

<sup>12</sup> Poem: From the Book of Hours by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Joanna Macy.

*And I'll march with you my brother, to the mountain top  
we'll hold back the dynamite, make the rumble stop*

*Oh be a pillar, I'll be your mockingbird  
We'll sing the rock of ages, yes we will be heard  
Let's form a great salvation through harmony and sound  
We'll know the shape of progress, like nature, is always round<sup>13</sup>* There are strong traditions, and many ancestors, spanning culture, tradition,

time and species, inviting us into wider circles of understanding, wider circles of awareness, and wider circles of what is possible. And the question that has kept coming back to me in time reading, reflecting, researching, and probably most true: prayerful uncertainty; has been: *who are our partners? Who am I in relationship with? Who am I not? What is my particular calling within the social location, history, and context I inhabit?* The word, *inhabit*, has also swirled around me during this time. In what ways, I wonder, should I act as humble and grateful guest to the grandeur, wonder, and beauty of a complex and simply lovely world? In what ways, I wonder, should I remember how intricately connected, part and parcel with, and accountable to all that is since the beginning of time, and act as an interwoven part of this fabric holding life together?

There is something about the *love* of the land that several of our authors speak about that points us to be mindful, grateful, and deeply connected to the love of particular places and landscapes. It is an intentional shift from *dominion*, as in the old genocide-inflicting doctrine of manifest destiny, toward a reminder that in some way, at the core and center of the universe, is care, love, and nourishment.

“Symbiosis counters the idea that evolution is inherently and solely competitive.”<sup>14</sup> It is just as much our instinct and tradition to be communal and

<sup>13</sup> *Rising Appalachia*, Wider Circles Album, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> *Earth Emotions*, 108.

cooperative, for the sake of survival, than the imperialistic interpretation of *survival of the fittest*. Perhaps, instead, our lineage of survival is one of *survival of the adaptive*.

Forests are one ancient teacher here. As Glenn Albrecht writes, “...*mother trees* [control] fungal networks that in turn interconnect trees of varying ages and species. The control system regulates nutrient flows to trees that need them most, such as very young ones...it also works to transfer information and energy from dying species to those that might continue to thrive.”<sup>15</sup>

This is natural redistribution and sharing of resources based on equity and need. This is how living things survive and thrive for millennia. This is not new knowledge or information that cooperative and communal forms of social structure are what best hold us together, provide us with equitable support rather than “everyone gets the same thing no matter how they are different.” We have long ignored voices in many fields, including biology and science, trying to help humanity understand both the damage caused to, and the potential learning offered freely from, the natural world.

“Many champions of symbiosis and holistic views of life were marginalized in their respective male-dominated fields... Rachel Carson... was forwarding the idea of the “web of life”... her famous work, *Silent Spring*, gave specific emphasis to the interrelatedness of life... she wrote, *This soil community, then, consists of a web of interwoven lives, each in some way related to the others – the living creatures depending on the soil, but the soil in turn a vital element of the earth only so long as this community within it flourishes.*”<sup>16</sup>

Carson, of course, was still a “white westerner”, with certain access and privilege, though limited, that still many others did not, and do not, have. Other teachers have

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Earth Emotions*, 96.

been present in these conversations for generations, if we are mindful and soul attuned enough to pay attention. Each tradition has had a myriad of styles of teachers and roles to help us understand the truths of interconnection in different ways, attending to the many ways we learn and live. For instance,

*“...we can think queer ecology through the historical examples of tricksters, magicians and shamans, and radical faeries. Tricksters, of course, are meant to blur the boundaries between right and wrong, life and death, male and female, humans and animals, and humans and the divine. They do this in order to keep the world from becoming ossified into any given human, located perspective. ...they help break open the collective, or they help us to pay attention to the abjects and remainders of any given concept, idea, culture, social norm, etc. In a different way, magicians and shamans also play a role in dealing with the abject: they often see what is left unseen and work to bridge spirit/imagination with the material world in combinations that seem unbelievable to everyday reason.”<sup>17</sup>*

We are the recipients of the gifts of ancestors, human and non-human alike, inviting us to remember we are co-creators of the universe, part and parcel with all that is, and do not have a definitive outcome because our very existence is, and has always been, on the move.

*“Our ancestors really are here with us in this process, as are future generations of life the exact nature of which we cannot even fathom. We need hopes and dreams that are not “out of this world” but that are of, for, and with this world. We need technologies for the planet, not just for human beings. We need mechanisms that transgress our current boundaries for living even if we are not certain of the goals toward which we are working. As we transgress boundaries, perhaps a better marker of progress will not be economic or material per se, but through how those transgressions ripple out and effect other planetary bodies. Such a mapping will enable us to adapt our ethics to changing needs and to be versatile in the employment of our ethics given the needs that arise in a specific evolving situation. Adaptability and versatility rather than “sticking to your principles” or*

<sup>17</sup> *Meaningful Flesh*, 117.

*“maintaining coherence,” may perhaps be the grounds for principles we need for new ways of becoming that recognize just how queer this planetary process is.”<sup>18</sup>*

### ***On the Move...***

We know there are more teachers than time, or awareness, to name them. We know that our existence is rooted in creative forces that can bust apart millennia of rock and equitably distribute resources based on diversity of need. These are not progressive concepts in the philosophy of some lone voice at the city council speaking toward abolition of the police, though it relates. This is a biological and generational reality of how we survive and thrive, and how we must find ways to do so again.

As I think and feel and pray about the ways to be *moved*, and to move, in some life-giving creative posture toward the infinite possibilities of what is yet to come, I come to a final gift of our resources: the idea of *Shimmer*.

We are, because of love at the core of all things, much more likely to care for and protect and be inspired by things, places, people, animals, landscapes, that we love. One way our authors understood this, was *Shimmer*.

*“Shimmer, or brilliance, is – people say – one’s actual capacity to see and experience ancestral power...Ethnomusicologists describe these experiences as iridescence...where the music and the dance become iridescent (or shimmer) with ancestral power.”<sup>19</sup>*

I believe we’re called to sacred, ancient imagining. I believe we are called to imagine the ways we can ground ourselves in our fluid and boundary-breaking biology, at one with the ever-expanding and brilliant stars of the heavens. I believe that it is in our understanding of collective *salvation*, or *solteria*, or *wholeness*, that

<sup>18</sup> *Meaningful Flesh*, 119-120.

<sup>19</sup> *Damaged Planet*, G54.

the words of biblical scripture keep coming back to me: *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*.

It is certainly a time of trembling and fear. It is certainly a time of climate

collapse that is impacting lives, human and non-human, in devastating ways.

Shimmy, shimmer, shining – inner light, the spark of the divine, the big bang – the sacred dance of light and dark, now and not yet. All of these words of movement, of possibility, of something more than some dichotomy of light and dark, but something that becomes a dance of the heart and soul in sync, symbiosis, with the divine, with ancestors, with all that is and was and is yet to be, world without end – this moves me. And, if I'm lucky, it moves me in wider and wider circles, from picking up cans to soothing sore skin in ancient waters coming out of a rock wall. A poet writes,

“The rising hills, the slopes,  
of statistics lie before us.  
the steep climb of everything, going up, up,  
as we all go down.

In the next century  
or the one beyond that, they say,  
are valleys, pastures,  
we can meet there in peace  
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests  
one word to you,  
to you and your children:

stay together  
learn the flowers  
go light.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Poem: For the Children*, by Gary Snyder